

## Take a Message

By  
Lad Moore



*Pony Express Rider*

*“The new Morse Telegraph instrument is said to perch upon a wobbly three-legged milk stool. One leg is intrusive and insensible—just wires draped across trees like felled kite cord. The next leg presents up a silly language that contains no words, just dot and dash clatter that even a clever red-headed woodpecker could mock. The last leg is but a mere child, doing message delivery work that rightfully belongs to family men. Surely God will have this folly fail!”*

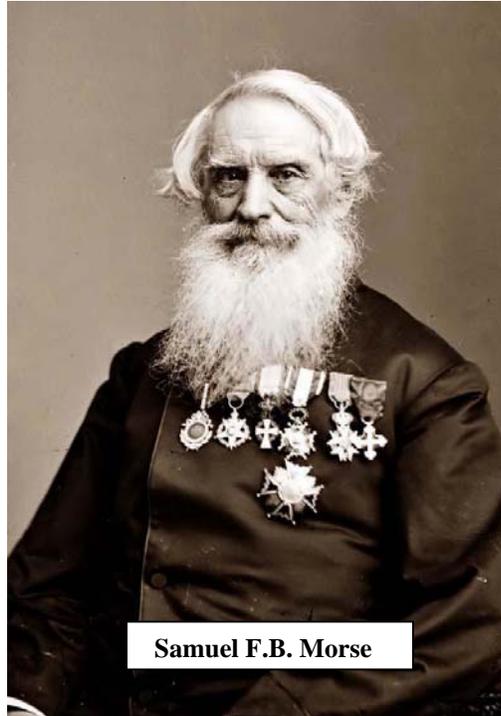
—Sentiments of an Unknown Express Rider

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On a small plot at 100 N. Washington Street, Marshall, Texas, the first telegraph office in the state was established. The Texas and Red River Telegraph Company

opened its office in the city on Feb. 14, 1854, offering patrons connections with New Orleans via Shreveport and with Alexandria, Louisiana, and Natchez,

Mississippi. It was new to Texas but not the world. The telegraph was already ten years old after its inventor, Samuel Morse, had sent the world's first formal transmission on May 24, 1844. Was his four-word message that day foretelling? It read simply, "*What hath God wrought?*" Perhaps the message was meant to convey one of Morse's great fears. From the beginning, he was mindful of the potential risk for misuse of his new medium. Before it was even operational, he warned his assistant to "be especially careful not to give a partisan tone to any information you may transmit." Morse showed great insight in this warning, realizing that once a message was sent on the wire, it could not be retrieved nor the sentiment retracted.



Samuel F.B. Morse

Later in 1854 the Texas service was expanded to include Henderson, Houston, Montgomery, Galveston, Rusk, and Crockett. Expansion was growing so fast that line poles were not yet in widespread use. The wires were simply strung from trees and over rooftops. The maintenance of the lines fell to the telegraph office operators. It was common for them to lock their office and ride on horseback to repair fallen or broken wires.

It was a bit ironic that the expansion of the telegraph from east to west found its way to Marshall because of an earlier event involving Morse and the Republic of Texas. In April 1838, Morse had offered to give his invention to "the new Texas Nation." A letter from Memucan Hunt, Secretary of the Texas Navy, made it known to then Texas President Mirabeau B. Lamar of Morse's offer for "perpetual use of the electro magnetic telegraph." The letter was accompanied by drawings of the telegraph instrument, which by then had had a patent filed. Neither Hunt nor President Lamar responded to Morse. Receiving no answer to his offer, he withdrew it in a later letter. His model instrument is still kept in the State Archives Building at Austin.

**Marshall Texas Republican, February 1854:**

*"The Magnetic Telegraph is at length in operation between Marshall and New Orleans."*

The one line proclamation in the local weekly newspaper did not faithfully convey the significance of the milestone. The advent of the telegraph was singly the world's most important communication method not rivaled again until the arrival of the telephone in 1876, and the radio, in 1896.

In this period before telephones were widespread and long distance calls were quite expensive, the telegram became the chief method of communication. They served almost all facets of how people conducted their business and private lives. They could be sober or happy; one did not know until the envelope had been ripped open and the message read. But people knew that any telegram received held some important content. The military used telegrams to notify families of soldiers killed in battle. Soldiers on the front proposed to their brides-to-be at home. Businesses relied on them to not only transmit important information, but to create a legal printed record. Families and friends used telegrams to announce births, deaths, reunions, condolences, and congratulatory messages. It seemed to be the answer to every communication need and its popularity soared. It was even the stuff of poetry, as this one, from an unnamed Pennsylvania preacher, 1848.

*“Along the smooth and slender wires, the sleepless heralds run,  
Fast as the clear and living rays go streaming from the sun;  
No pearls of flashes, heard or seen, their wondrous flight betray,  
And yet their words are quickly caught in cities far away.”*

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### How Did Early America Communicate?

Dating back to colonial times, the task of moving mail and news was challenging if not daunting. Most of the country then was sparsely populated or even uninhabited. Certainly there were no conveyances that could easily trek the great distances void of roads or even trails. People entrusted private messengers or travelers to carry letters to other destinations.

In 1780 The Continental Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin to head what they would describe as a Colonial Post Office Department. It was Franklin's mission to establish a functioning agency to carry and deliver mail. He would have to compete against the private posts that had been springing up primarily in the eastern US. A number of these privately owned local mail deliverers were doing well in their mission to carry mail. An example was “Bloods Penny Post” which began in Philadelphia. Bloods is credited with the first glue-backed postage stamp.

By 1840, the private posts thrived, primarily the result of extremely poor mail distribution by the U.S. Postal Service. A revolution in communications was taking place in the United States and the Postal Service was not growing as fast. In the 1840s there was the rapid development of the railroads, ocean transport,

commerce with the Orient, and steamboats, necessitating an efficient communications system.

As the private posts saw more expansion and good profitability, the U.S. Postal Service applied muscle to the US Congress to control and regulate the private carriers and their fees. These actions resulted in numerous fights in the courts, but the government prevailed and the private carriers were one by one disbanded. Congress passed a host of laws extinguishing the legal rights of the private posts to operate. One of these, The Postal Act of 1851, authorized the U.S. Postal Service to monopolize the collection and delivery of all mail. By 1883 the last of the private posts were driven out of business.

From eastern population westward, it largely fell to horse and rider to deliver the mail. One such carrier, known as the Pony Express, was successful but short lived. Its over 150 relay stations lasted less than two years, a victim to overland stage routes. These stagecoach and train deliveries allowed large quantities of mail and goods to travel great distances in short periods of time. A record was set when Lincoln's 1861 inaugural address was delivered from Missouri to California in a record seven days.

Once at a destination city or rural location, there was no local delivery method for mail. It meant going into town to get one's letters either at a post office location or the county clerk's office. Mail not retrieved would be listed and announced in the newspaper as a means to notify patrons that mail had been received. Neighbors helped neighbors when in town, picking up each other's mail. Home delivery expansion was slow outside of major cities, and many rural and outlying areas did not get direct deliveries or local post offices until after 1900.

The Civil War had tremendous impact on mail in the South. The CSA officially formed on February 4, 1861 but the Confederate Postal Service did not begin operations for four months. The Union continued to deliver mail even into seceded states through May, but ceased doing so on June 1. The CSA did not have postage stamps until the following October when the Jefferson Davis "Greenie" was issued. In CSA states, the former post offices of the Union had been seized by the confederates, and the postmaster simply wrote the word "paid" on the envelope along with the amount. All mail postage had to be prepaid by the sender at the post office. Some months later, mechanical hand stamps replaced handwritten "Paid" markings in the larger offices. Confederate rates were five cents per half ounce compared to the US rate of three cents. In the end, the Confederate Postal Service actually operated at a profit!

The most disorganized of the states was Virginia. Lower Virginia was CSA, and Western Virginia was pro-Union. The towns west of the mountains switched sides back and forth, and post offices were alternatively staffed by both sides. One might not know which stamp issue he would get on his next visit. In other mixes,

Missouri and Kentucky were claimed by both sides, and operated with dual governments.

Paper in the CSA reached critical shortages, and before the end of the war, letters were being created using scraps of wrapping paper, book flyleaves, and even wallpaper. Envelopes for the most part did not exist. The mail piece was simply folded and the addressee's name was printed on one side. Some were sealed with candle wax to make them more private.

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### Telegraph Growth, Expansion, and Consolidation

Marshall's initial telegraph company, The Texas and Red River Telegraph, soon merged with the Texas and New Orleans Telegraph Company. The latter was chartered in 1856 and constructed lines from Galveston to San Antonio and Austin. Meanwhile, South Western Telegraph had extended the line from Galveston to New Orleans. These companies consolidated with American Telegraph Company. In 1856 New York & Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company was renamed Western Union Telegraph Company as it acquired rival American Telegraph. Five years later Western Union completed the first trans-continental telegraph line, laying the foundation for a successful coast-to-coast communication system.

Western Union's presence in Texas dated from 1866. As it was doing all across the country, it achieved majority domination of the market in 1874 when it owned ninety percent of the offices in Texas, engaging 1500 miles of wire.



The story of Western Union presented additional irony for the Marshall area. Well known in the United States, and particularly to Marshall and Jefferson, was the oft-accused "robber-baron," Jay Gould.

In 1879, Gould was forced out of the Erie Railroad due to allegedly having sold fake shares in the company. The state of the Erie company was such that it was referred to as "*The Scarlet Woman of Wall Street.*" Gould quickly

began to build up a system of railroads by gaining control of the Union Pacific, Texas & Pacific, and the Missouri Pacific. By 1880, he controlled 10,000 miles of track, or about ten percent of the nation's rail. This control expanded to fifteen percent a mere one year later. In this time period he had also obtained a controlling interest in the Western Union Telegraph Company. He was considered to be one of the principal financial operators in the rail industry, and his miles of track facilitated the installation of companion telegraph lines across the country to serve the railroad and newspaper communication demand. During the Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886 he hired strikebreakers; and was quoted as saying, "I can hire one-half of the working class to kill the other half."

Gould's reputation grew as did his holdings and his zeal. In August 1869, Gould attempted to corner the US gold market in order to artificially inflate the price of wheat. He gambled that a sudden increase in wheat and wheat foodstuff prices would greatly increase the freight revenue for his newest railroad, the Wabash. His market speculation, and that of his partners in the effort, caused what became known as the Black Friday Panic. On September 24, 1869, the price of gold over face value fell from 62% to 35%. This action created an image for Gould as being ruthless and all-powerful, able to influence market forces at his whim. Even though Gould suffered great personal losses in the panic, there was such a fear surrounding him that he would be blamed for future market fluctuations that investment brokers could not otherwise explain to clients.

Jay Gould's brush with Jefferson, Texas is the stuff of persistent legend. The legend, some say unfounded, is that wealthy Jeffersonians had shunned his railroad in favor of the steamboat and its successful and lucrative river trade. They considered Gould an "intruder and a pirate." It seems that city fathers had expressed to Gould a preference to "having grass grow in their streets rather than accommodate his steel rails." Gould, in anger, allowed that without railroads, the city would get its wish.

It was true that Jefferson had become major river port in this period. The Big Cypress River that flowed through the town was navigable by steamboats from New Orleans. Major local deposits of iron ore brought foundry smelters and iron-smithy works, while plentiful forests formed a major export lumber industry. At its high population mark of 30,000, the Jefferson Basin would contain as many as a dozen steamboats at its wharves, loading and unloading wagon trains traveling westward.

Jay Gould may have been right. Very little of the prosperity prevailed and the growth of Jefferson slowed and died. The railroads, as predicted, ended the era of the river steamboats.

In contrast to its neighbor Jefferson, the city of Marshall opened its arms to Jay Gould with an offer of free land and \$300,000 in cash. In 1871, he gladly brought them the Texas and Pacific Railroad. The sprawling T&P shops were quickly

built to serve the fabrication and maintenance of the rail cars. By far the largest employer, Texas and Pacific in Marshall provided 25 percent of all the city's jobs. East Texas' large amounts of cotton shipments complemented the railroad nicely, and a strong period of growth in housing and local businesses followed.

When Jay Gould died of tuberculosis in 1893, his holdings went to his family, along with his fortune of \$77 million, very sizeable at the time. By then, telegraph expansion was nearly complete, having moved with lightning speed across the country. As a benchmark of this fast paced rate of growth, telegraph cable to Europe was already thirty years old. Western Union Telegraph's domination now enjoyed a virtual monopoly.



*In Texas, Western Union became the only telegraph company in the state after its acquisition of The Postal Telegraph and Cable Company. In its telegraph heyday in the late forties, Western Union employed 2,802 people and operated 1,828 offices in the state.*

Western Union had such a large impact on the American fabric that it could not long escape the attention of writers and Hollywood. In 1941, a movie adaptation



of Zane Grey's book "Western Union" was released starring then-heroes Randolph Scott and Robert Young. It is said that the movie did not accurately follow the content of Zane Grey's novel. Promo Storyline:

*" Vance Shaw gives up outlawing and goes to work for the telegraph company; Jack Slade leads outlaws trying to prevent the company from connecting the line between Omaha and Salt Lake City. Lots of Indian fighting and gunplay."*

## The Icon and the Paradox of the Telegraph Messenger Boy

No discussion of telegraph and its impact can exclude the “third leg” of the stool, the messenger boy. There will long be controversy about these young boys—whether or not they were pawns of a greedy entrepreneur, an exploitation of cheap child labor, or the backbone of what made Western Union thrive and prosper. Perhaps it was all of these things.



From the beginning, telegrams were hand-delivered to the recipient by these Western Union couriers. In the early beginnings, when child labor laws were lax or non-existent, boys as young as 10 or 11 would be hired as messengers and would ride bicycles to deliver the telegrams to their intended destinations. Western Union typically purchased as many as 3000 bicycles per year, then sold them at discount prices to the messengers. City bikes were equipped with thumb bells to alert pedestrians and automobiles of their presence. The work was frenzied and competitive. Messenger boys were expected to ‘scorch’ their tires and race to destinations. In many offices, their elapsed turnaround time was closely measured. It is recorded that one John Dickinson of Dallas, Texas accumulated more than 16,000 miles between April and September of 1916.

The boys were made to understand that the very reputation of the telegraph company was in their hands. They were taught how to present themselves well

and how to behave with utmost courtesy. In idle times, they were ushered into backrooms of the telegraph office so that the public would not see them and conclude they were not being efficiently utilized. They were paid in differently-structured wage programs often varying between densities, i.e., major or rural population centers. Some were paid piece rate. Some were paid flat monthly rates. Others were paid flat plus overages based on distance from what was called the “free delivery zone,” a pre-determined geography that encircled the telegraph office. But the result was about the same, with boys earning ten to fifteen dollars a month on average, plus tips received from patrons.

How could there be controversy surrounding these innocent messenger boys? The “*Along the Santa Fe*” Railroad Publication gives us one boy’s account of becoming a courier.

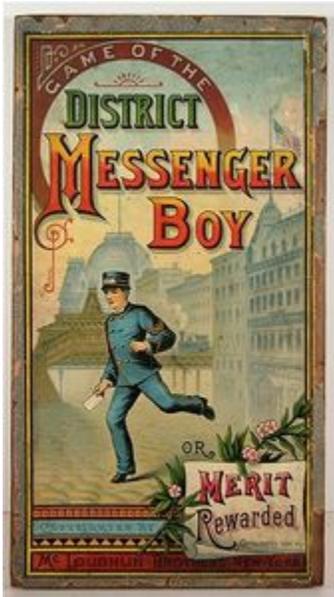


*“There was an ex-railroad telegraph operator and auditor who lived across the street from us. He had opened up a telegraph school uptown, and called it “The Capitol City Railway and Telegraph Institute.” He offered me free tuition if I would do the janitor work at the school. He painted a pretty rosy picture of the future of railroading, and I got quite interested, and finally decided to quit school and my job at the meat market and attend this*

*school. The course in telegraphy was supposed to take about six months, and it was quite interesting. I had just turned sixteen at the time, and stuck to it for about five months. I got so I could read the telegraph pretty good, but as I was too young to get a job on the railroad as a telegrapher (you had to be at least 18 years of age), I had a chance to get a job as a messenger boy at the local Western Union Telegraph office at a salary of \$10.00 per month and tips and extra pay for delivering telegrams outside the free delivery limits. So I took this job, figuring I could keep up my telegraph work besides earning a little money.*

*“I liked my job at the telegraph office and got quite a lot of practice in. I got to running around with several other boys my age, and we would play pool, and also I learned to smoke cigarettes.”*

## The Messenger Boy “Merit” Game



*A Victorian board game was created to show how the truly diligent or “Plucky” messenger boys would be rewarded by their ascent from the bottom of the workplace ladder all the way to Company President. Plucky boys would be the ones chosen for merit, because they had not succumbed to cigarette smoking, tossing dice, or playing cards, and had saved their earnings for education. As in “real life,” metal game tokens of messenger boy figures would progress around the playing board as they won such merits.*

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The men and women who worked for Western Union in the office and field positions enjoyed good fixed wages and union benefits commensurate with the socially important roles of the electrical transfer of communication. Unlike these workers, telegraph delivery boys worked outdoors under no supervision, saw no union guarantees, and for the most part performed tasks like contractors but without contracts. In larger metropolitan offices, the company would at least provide uniform laundries, locker rooms, assembly halls, and classrooms. In a sort of vocational education program known as “The Western Union Continuation School,” messengers attended “Company Class” on a four hour-a-week schedule rather than the 36-hour week of public schools. Western Union billed it as “the prep school to the University of Business.”

Their tasks and routines exposed them not only to the dangers of collisions in street traffic, but the darker elements of vice and corruption as well. During slack times while sequestered in basements and back rooms by the company, the boys smoked, read “penny dreadfuls,” shot dice, or gambled on poker hands. Certain messages would be held in the office until the darkness of night when the boys would be sent on deliveries into the city’s red light district, thus avoiding public scrutiny. As part of the company “front,” weekends often were spent in military-type marching drills in downtown areas meant to impress the public.

*Author’s Note: A “Penny Dreadful” was a type of British fiction publication in the 19th century that usually featured lurid serial stories appearing in parts over a number of weeks, each part costing a penny. The penny dreadfuls were aimed primarily at working class adolescents.*

In time, the youngsters gained ‘street savvy’ and began to press their workplace and salary demands on the company by engaging in unsanctioned work stoppages.

There were attempts to unionize the messengers, which led one trade publication in 1899 to call messenger strikes the "absurd actions of lazy boys."

One Illinois account from a 1903 NY Times article:

*"Police were called up to keep order in a downtown action today. Telegraph boys made a demand for three cents a message, doubling the present rate. The boys are in the employ of the Illinois Telegraph Company of Western Union. The entire forces of messengers are out on strike in the downtown district. A committee of the striking youngsters called on Organizer John Fitzpatrick of the Federation of Labor to make arrangements for a meeting where the boys will ask to be formed into a union."*

The strong availability of willing replacement workers made unionization difficult and largely unsuccessful. Even so, attempts continued to be made such as the 1910 Central Federated Union strike that involved over 500 messengers. So as to prevent future large stoppages such as this, Western Union created the Association of Western Union Employees (AWUE). It was an effective weapon, because its legislated minimum voting age of eighteen effectively excluded most of the messengers. However, visible efforts like the Illinois and CFE strikes helped bring public awareness to Western Union's practices.

Early in the twentieth century, Western Union was the single largest employer of child labor in the nation, elevating it into the top ten targets of Progressive Era reform agendas and as a focus point for child labor laws. There became wider public awareness of messenger boy vice and corruption, including delivery of messages into places of ill-repute, and doing paid tasks for organized crime in drugs, gambling, and prostitution. Reformers pressured telegraph companies to eliminate practices involving corrupting influences, and to greatly diminish the use of minor-aged messengers. This pressure had its effect, although with these changes, the company saw its messenger wage costs rise. Competing methods such as taxi, postal subcontracts, and telephone voice delivery began to diminish overall messenger population. While Western Union messenger boys eventually disappeared altogether, the practice of bicycle messenger delivery of letters and parcels still remains today in large metropolitan centers.

#### End of the Marshall Western Union Office

From Texas and Red River Telegraph's original Marshall location in the 100 block of North Washington, the Western Union office had at least one other location closer to the 300 block of the same street. It had served the city and area through good and bad times including a number of wars, and had survived several competing communication breakthroughs.

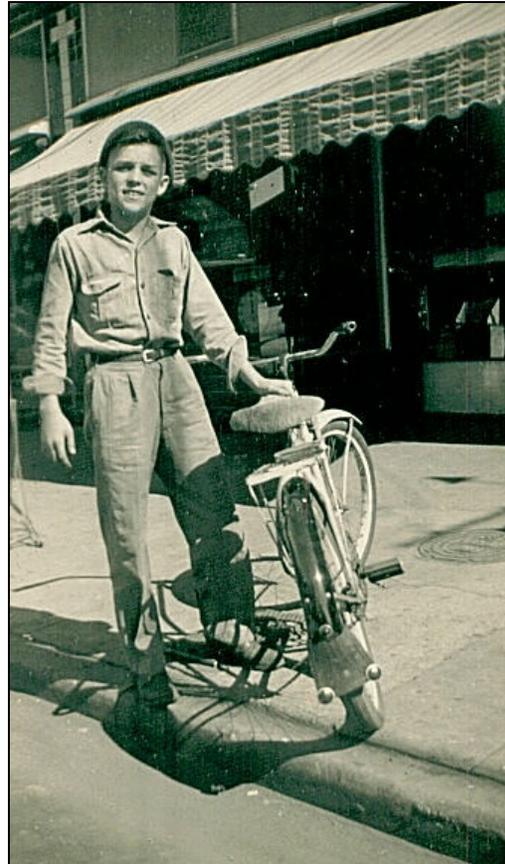
Eventually though, the rows of warm desk lights would be darkened and the clack of the sounder would be stilled. After 117 years, on February 9, 1972, The

*Longview Morning Journal* announced that the final Marshall Telegraph Office message had been sent. Commemorating the office closure, the message was addressed to Dr. R.R. Fagan of Marshall, and sent by Mr. T.O. Welch, a long time employee of the Marshall branch. It read:

*“Keep this memento of the last telegram delivered from the main office of the Western Union Telegraph Company.”*



*Photo Left: Marshall Western Union Operator Mary Pilcher Banks (L) and friend, unknown. 300 Block North Washington St. ca. 1954.*

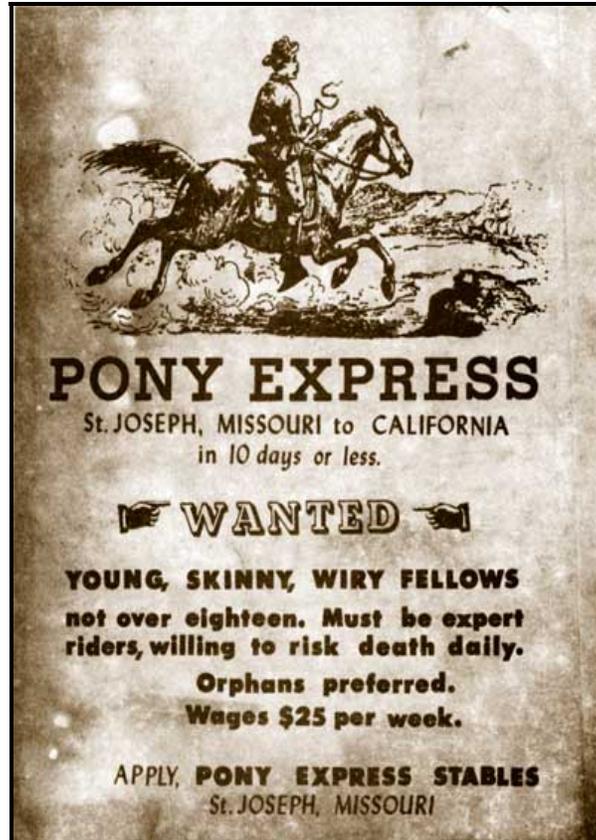


*Photo Right: Unidentified Marshall Western Union Messenger Boy, ca. 1954.*

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### Lament of the Pony Express Rider

In his journal, the weathered old cowboy did not mask his irreverence for the new:



Recruitment Poster

*“It is remarked that Mr. Samuel Morse’s ‘Electro-Magnetic Telegraph’ and his Messenger Boy army has caused the hasty death of our beloved Pony Express. It is true that the new beast requires no oats, is shod with fatted tires, and carries a young and skimpy-boned rider who is happy with a penny wage.”*

*“Sad was the day that the wedded heartbeats of a man and his pony lost their drumbeat to simple steel wires that emit but a whimsical monotonous hum. It was always the vigor of our men who conquered the unknown, and now it is those same men who are suffered by losing their place in what was.”*

*“Not one single night will this new messenger boy endure a crossing of the chilled and lonely prairie with only the light of the stars as his navigator.”*

—Lords

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Credits and Citations

'Lords' is a pseudonym of the writer, Lad Moore  
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 Telegraph Poetry: Neal McEwen: <http://www.telegraph-office.com/>  
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